

# A Note on Habitat Decline and the Status of the Spotted Button-quail *Turnix maculosa salomonis* on Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands

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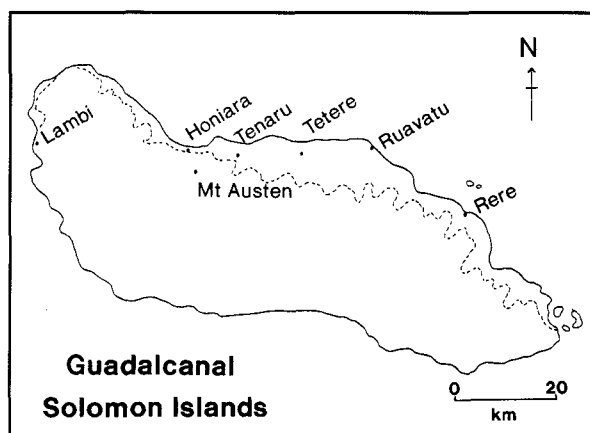
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Although Mayr (1945) stated that the Solomon Islands Spotted Button-quail (Red-backed Button-quail) *Turnix maculosa salomonis* was known only from a single bird from the grasslands of Guadalcanal (Fig. 1), subsequent observations by Pendleton (1947) in 1943 indicated that it was not uncommon. He showed that it inhabited the large grassland area that occupied the northwest coastal plain and believed it was not in any immediate danger of extinction because only a small portion of this large area of habitat had been destroyed during the 1939-1945 war. Beecher (1945) collected two specimens from Tenaru (about 15 km east of Honiara) in 1944 and stated that the species was not uncommon locally throughout the grassland of the Guadalcanal north coast. Galbraith and Galbraith (1962) collected five specimens in 1953, also from Tenaru.

The present authors spent over 50 man-days bird

watching on the Guadalcanal coastal plain during periods of residence between 1985 and 1989 and have surveyed most of the coastal plain between Lambi and Rere (140 km). A single *T. maculosa* was seen in August 1988 at the edge of grassland adjacent to secondary forest, just above the war memorial on the Mt Austen road. Other than this record, however, no Spotted Button-quail were seen in any grassland areas until December 1989, when the old Rice Project area at Tetere (about 20 km east of Honiara) was surveyed. This agricultural development of at least 100 ha was devastated by cyclone Namu in 1985, after which rice cultivation was abandoned and the area left fallow. It now consists of a series of large flat paddocks separated by bunds about a metre in height. The vegetation comprises mainly long grasses, with occasional narrow bands of tall sedges and patches of the invasive weed *Mimosa pudica*. Spotted Button-quail were common in this habitat and were seen on each of three visits. It was impossible to assess actual numbers despite systematic walking transects because birds were difficult to flush (see also Pendleton 1947) and denser areas of *Mimosa* could not be traversed. Only glimpses were obtained of birds on the ground and sizes of coveys could not be estimated. Usually single birds were flushed although on one occasion a group of three was recorded. The only other species in the area were Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*, Buff-banded Rail *Rallus philippensis*, the former very abundant, and a single sighting of White-browed Crake *Poliolimnas cinereus*.

Most of the grasslands of the coastal plain alluded to by Pendleton (1947) have now been destroyed, either by housing developments or various forms of agriculture. At least half of the coastal plain east of Honiara to Ruavatu (45 km) has been cleared for plantations or human settlement. Oil palm estates now cover thousands of hectares and new ones are being established.



**Figure 1** Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands showing localities mentioned in text. The northern coastal plain lies north of the 50 m contour (-----).

The Tenaru area (site of most of the earlier records) has been converted to agricultural land, cocoa plantations and pastures for livestock. This area was visited on several occasions but no button-quail were seen.

Our observations indicate that only relatively small areas of suitable habitat for Spotted Button-quail remain on the coastal plain of northern Guadalcanal. The *salamonis* subspecies of *Turnix maculosa* is not known from other islands in the Solomons (Mayr 1945; Galbraith & Galbraith 1962; Hadden 1981; Blaber 1990). Given the now restricted amount of natural grassland on Guadalcanal, continuing agricultural development and the uncertain future of the Rice Project area, it is probable that this subspecies is in danger of extinction.

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